

FACT AND MYTH IN SOCIAL CLASS THEORY

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Among the problems confronting sociologists, none is more perplexing than the discrepancy between generalizations about class trends on the one hand and the evidence of common sense on the other. Recent studies in stratification have described American society as tending toward decreasing mobility, crystallizing statuses, and hardening class lines (Lynd, 1937; Warner and others, 1941, 1947). Yet there persists, in both lay and scientific groups, much skepticism regarding these conclusions. Some of the skepticism may represent an unconscious defense of the myths of a competitive society; but an important part appears to be more objectively grounded. In common experience there are repeated suggestions that the portrait of the United States as a slowly-congealing social system may be essentially false.

SOURCES OF ERROR IN CLASS THEORY

The ambiguity in contemporary thought about social class is especially significant for two sectors of class theory. The first is the area of conceptual analysis, where present activity centers on the identification and description of class. This area is implicated because of certain weaknesses in the over-all theory of class systems. In particular, the linkages between class structure and the major dynamic influences in society—e.g., technological change, or shifting power structures—remain poorly conceptualized. As a result, trends in stratification tend to be generalized from perceptions of short-term changes in the empirics of class, not deduced from a realistic system of class theory. Insofar as taxonomy and primary structural analysis are a necessary first step in science, a full-blown theoretical system is hardly to be expected at this stage in the history of sociology. Until a more productive conceptual scheme is achieved, however, the present confusion about social class is likely to continue.

The second sector of theory implicated in this problem is concerned with the dynamics of class. This sector contains generalizations about changes in vertical mobility, criteria of status, intensity of class consciousness, and rigidity of stratification. A primary difficulty in this area is that motivation has run well ahead of technique—the result, in part, of a concern with practical problems in a period of crisis, and, in part, of stimulation by radical theories of social process. The latter include hypotheses about the proletarianization of the masses, the inevitability of class conflict, and so on. The content of this area is somewhat polemical, despite the moderating influence of such work as Cooley's (1925) analysis of the evolution of class systems, and Sorokin's (1927) investigation of social mobility. In general, it is this sector of class theory whose hypotheses merit the lowest level of confidence, and it is here that a concern with myth is probably most appropriate.

This discussion will consider three types of data on changing class structures: (1) empirical generalizations, (2) isolated analytical hypotheses, and (3) systematic theories. All degrees of generality, speculativeness, and consistency will be found in these materials. Their principal common feature is a support, implicit or otherwise, of the conclusion that American society is tending toward increasing rigidity of class lines.

REPRESENTATIVE ELEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY

The major generalizations in class dynamics deal with the monopolization of certain social values by select groups. Representative among these are the

following: Sorokin's (1927) finding that millionaires tend increasingly to be the offspring of millionaires; the Taussig and Joslyn (1932) discovery that American business leaders are increasingly the sons of business leaders; the Lynd (1937) and Warner (1947) observations that entrance into the ranks of management from the shop or assembly line has diminished markedly in recent decades.

In some studies of stratification trends, the generalizations embrace not just one occupation but families of occupations, or even whole social strata. The Lynd (1937) report on the second Middletown study, for example, implies increasing exclusiveness in the independent professions relative to the salaried or dependent professions. Somewhat analogous is Mills' (1946) discovery of a tendency toward increasing rigidity in the upper middle class, not only occupationally but also in other respects.

These direct indicators of a crystallizing class structure have been partially integrated by a number of analytical hypotheses. Several hypotheses relate to the declining effectiveness of institutions as aids to upward social mobility. The industrial organization, the credit structure, and the educational system have all been singled out as elements of society whose mobility function has been impaired (Lynd, 1937; Mills, 1946; Warner, 1947). Other of these hypotheses connect shrinking mobility with an increasing interest in compensatory goals, ranging from labor union activity on the one hand (Havighurst, 1947), to escape through vicarious experiences in the media of mass communication on the other (Smith, 1950).

The larger conceptual schemes dealing with class evolution give general support to the foregoing generalizations and hypotheses. Cooley (1925), by tying the emergence of class lines to competition and lineal inheritance, provided a rationale for future increases in the incidence of occupational and status inheritance. Other social scientists, notably Linton (1936), posit a close relationship between the working out of smooth adjustment in a society and an increase in the ascription of status. On the basis of this scheme one would anticipate signs of growing rigidity or hardening statuses in a society that was approaching "maturity." Finally, exponents of functional theories of stratification (Davis and Moore, 1945) have held that increase in rigidity should follow the definition and initial allocation of functions in a social system. This is in some respects a special case of Linton's theory, and entails much the same consequences for a society such as this.

These conceptual schemes all represent increasing stratification as a natural tendency in human societies. There is something analogous to negative entropy here, operating to place societies in a state of elaborate organization and unequal distribution of status. These outcomes, it should be noted, have basis both in logical implication and in empirical evidence. Historical materials as well as logic seem to suggest a general theory of class development in which progressive elaboration and status differentiation are fundamental consequences of the theory. Anthropological materials, for example, reveal a trend toward greater involvement in class systems in the more populous and more complex societies (McConnell, 1942). Other data show tendencies toward greater rigidity with increasing age and perfection of function in institutions (Cooley, 1922). There seems, therefore, ample justification for the existence of theoretical schemes of this character in the field of social stratification.

In the evaluation of the preceding materials, a number of approaches are possible. One might take exception to specific descriptive generalizations or hypotheses without questioning the underlying conceptual scheme itself. The frequency of methodological error or valuational bias makes this procedure desirable as a routine measure. It is also possible to raise questions as to the appropriateness or sufficiency of the conceptual scheme. At the present time both these courses appear necessary.

RECENT EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In an attempt to throw light on stratification trends in the United States, the writer has been studying occupational origins (defined as the "principal occupation of the informant's father") of business and professional men. Since 1947 two-generation histories have been obtained from about 1400 randomly-selected informants in several middle-sized cities. These data permit analysis of two kinds of trends. One is the secular trend of occupational origins of the informants, which provides a continuous index of gross rates of mobility in the society. The other is the trend of regional or geographical differences in origin means. The latter data provide a comparative picture of rigidities of older and newer sectors of the society.

The results of this study thus far may be summarized as follows: (1) Among "big businessmen," employers of 100 or more persons, occupational origins appear to be rising; also, there are no statistically significant differences between regions in origin means for this group. (2) Among professional men in the fields of medicine, law, engineering, and secondary-school teaching, the secular trend is one of gradually decreasing occupational origins. (3) For independent professionals, the most rapidly declining origins are found in medicine, which possesses the highest status of any profession in this society. (4) The mean occupational origins of professionals are lowest in the older parts of the nation, which contain, inferentially, the older sectors of the society. (5) In all the professions, but especially in law, there was a noticeable rise in occupational origins among the groups which entered these occupations in the 1930's.

These findings suggest a number of conclusions that are important for the preceding discussion. First, there is a continuing trend toward decreased occupational inheritance in the professions in this society. Second, there is no clear evidence that the educational system is becoming less effective as a channel of upward mobility. The reverse appears to be more probable. Third, the older, or what are believed to be the more status-ridden parts of the society, seem characterized by the greatest freedom of mobility into the professions.

Several criticisms of current stratification theory in the United States are implicit here. Many of the hypotheses concerning the role of education in the class system are undoubtedly questionable. Likewise, some of the generalizations on vertical mobility in certain occupations and strata appear to be contradicted. Finally, the total system of hypotheses relating to the rigidity of the structure of American society is in need of re-examination.

These criticisms become more pertinent when other factors are brought into consideration. If Mills' statement on increasing rigidity of the upper middle class is examined, the published evidence seems to be one empirical datum. Mills (1946, p. 528) states, "... the top (of the class system) is becoming more rigid: 73 per cent of the upper half of the income-occupational scale are descended from the upper half." Since no information on descent of younger as compared with older informants is given, the conclusion is a subjective estimate, open to all the hazards of such estimates. Similar criticism may be made of the Lynd (1937, p. 70) appraisal of inheritance trends in the independent professions in Middletown. Because these professions were relatively constant in membership for a generation or more, it was inferred that the former were not being entered from lower strata at significantly increased rates.

Two circumstances appear to make much of the empirical generalization and substantive theory on class phenomena somewhat suspect. One is the fact that the relevant research was done in a time of social crisis, and by men whose value systems inclined them toward progressive social action. The Lynd and Warner studies, empirical backbone of the "increasing rigidity" school, were both products of depression years. As such, they carried facts and inferences about a "maturing

economy," increasing conflict between business and working classes, and the like. But more than that, they revealed some readiness to indict the existing social order for both real and fancied shortcomings. The extent to which personal value systems determine the character of professional judgments of social scientists has been well elaborated elsewhere (Mills, 1943). The fact that such determination occurred in the recent history of class theory appears an almost incontestable proposition.

Aside from the impress of social values on their science, the depression years were unique for class theorists in another way. In the realm of empirical materials, these years yielded data whose projection into the future would have resulted in vast errors. The marked rise in occupational origins of attorneys during the 1930's is instructive here. Insofar as materials on stratification are loaded with data taken in this highly atypical period, a balanced perspective on trends has been difficult to achieve.

NECESSARY CONCEPTS IN DYNAMIC THEORY

Although ideological bias and contradictory evidence may be adequate grounds for questioning empirical findings on class, the most cogent criticisms of over-all conceptual schemes seem to be of another character. One point of departure is the inappropriateness of existing theory for analysis of societies such as this. Because of the nature of the social systems from which they derive, working hypotheses like those of Cooley, Linton, and Davis are more applicable to traditionalistic than to rationalistic structures. In societies of the latter type, increasingly dominated by scientific method, secularization, rationalization, and individuation, these theories need modification, or perhaps rejection.

The crucial test of the appropriateness of these conceptual schemes is their utility in predicting trends in class systems. However, lack of refinement in the schemes renders definitive testing of their predictive value impractical, so that the question of appropriateness must remain essentially speculative. It is possible, on the other hand, to raise the question of logical adequacy in a meaningful sense. Existing conceptual schemes fail to give place to, or at least to make explicit, certain variables that are increasingly significant for class systems, particularly in societies of the rationalistic type.

One of these variables is *power*, conceived simply as ability to influence behavior of individuals toward desired ends. Many changes in class systems in the Western world appear to be related causally to changes in what political sociologists call the "structure of power." This structure is determinately related to the criteria of status and the system of classes in human societies. An appreciable modification of power relationships is often followed by a redefinition of the criteria of status, and a consequent reshuffling of persons, positions, and roles. In brief, the rise of a new basis of power in a social system tends to recast the class structure of the society in greater or lesser measure.

In recent history, reorganization of power structures has tended to occur with increasing frequency, often as the unanticipated result of some phase of rationalization. Each major technological or social development forces a readjustment; and each readjustment, to paraphrase MacIver (1947, p. 105), has tended to benefit the group just below the incumbent power-holders. At the present time, interest centers on the strata commonly designated the "lower classes." By exploiting the power resident in organization, these classes are in a position to force further adjustments in present-day class systems.

Recent British experience is illuminating on this point. What appears to be indicated is not only a growing amenability of class systems to social pressure, but also an increasing intention to apply such pressure. Oxford historian Woodward (1950, p. 37) cites British labor leaders as remarking, in effect, "We intend to break the upper middle class, just as we broke the landed aristocracy." What-

ever the historical accuracy of these claims, the underlying sentiments are symptomatic of pressures in social structures that cannot be ignored by class theorists.

Related to the growing power of the lower classes, and partly determined by it, is the *redistribution of income* in Western society. A conspicuous feature of the secular rise in standards of living is the disproportionate improvement in the economic position of the lower classes. A short-term view of this process in Britain has been reported by Weaver (1950). Great Britain's working classes now take about 22 percent more consumer goods and services than before the war. Middle class consumption is of the order of 16 percent below that of prewar, and the wealthy classes now consume about 42 percent less than they did in 1938.

Although comparable figures are not available for the equivalent classes in the United States, there has been a parallel development here. Hayes (1947) has titled it, "The narrowing gulf between rich and poor." Income differentials are being progressively reduced, partly by devices characteristic of the "welfare state," and partly by a continuing rise in real wage levels in lower income brackets. Since 1900 there has been an increase of 108 percent in the purchasing power of the average factory worker (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1950). By way of comparison, college and university teachers, who may reflect roughly the changing fortunes of the middle classes, have approximately the same standard of living in 1950 as in 1900.

The significance of the redistribution of income among classes and the relative gain of the lower classes is two-fold. (1) Lower-class children have freer access to channels of upward mobility, with a consequent improvement of their chances in status competition with children from higher strata. This growing advantage may be evident in the declining status origins of professional persons in this society. (2) There is also a blurring of distinctions between status groups. A decrease in income differentials favors homogeneity of dress, cultural values, and style of life in general. The meaning of these for mobility differentials is clear. Like the downward diffusion of power, the leveling of incomes is a factor for reduced rigidity in society, and should have some place in a functional analysis of class.

Somewhat similar is the leveling in *occupational prestige* in contemporary industrial societies. This trend is a function of increasing need for skill in performance of the roles of a technologically and administratively complex social order. The extent of the trend may be indicated in several ways. One procedure is to assign occupational groups in the decennial census a prestige rating from one of several occupational rating scales. This permits comparison of prestige means of the working force in different census periods. In terms of points on the North-Hatt (1949) occupational rating scale, the average occupational prestige of the gainfully employed in the United States rose from 59.5 to 63.0 in the period between 1910 and 1950.

A notable aspect of the shift in occupational prestige is the fact that much of it is occurring through a reduction in percentages of unskilled workers. Schematically, this may be described as a shift of the lower-lower and upper-lower classes in the direction of the middle. This process has been noted in relatively advanced stages in some countries with longer histories of industrialization. Woodward (1950, p. 54) reported a virtual disappearance of the lower classes into the middle classes in Sweden, and the beginnings of a similar development in Britain.

There is a fourth variable that needs consideration in a functional theory of class in modern society. This is the phenomenon of *rationalization*, which now has touched practically all sectors of Western culture. In general, this process subjects both ends and means of social life to objective examination and rational determination. One major consequence is a pressure toward reduction of the amount of traditional behavior present in a society. Since much of contemporary

class theory implies a gradual rise in traditionalistic behavior, adherence to present conceptual schemes necessitates either a disregard or a minimization of the process of rationalization.

An important potentiality of a rationalized society and a democratic structure of power, in the present context, is that social class may take on the attributes of a "social problem." Specifically, class distinctions of the kind now evident in this society may become generally regarded as undesirable, and hence the proper object of modification through the usual channels of social action.

Indications of strain in this direction are fairly common. In the United States the trend is most evident in the area of educational opportunity. The principal actions thus far are federal aid to veterans of World War II, the growing system of community and junior colleges, and, in the nature of a token, the New York state scholarships for talented high-school graduates. On the level of plan and sentiment, there are bills before the 82nd Congress—S3996 and HR9429—which propose aid to college students on the basis of "demonstrated ability," and some disposition on the part of the Congress to resist draft deferment for college students without compensatory action in behalf of non-college youth. Outside the field of education, various aspects of the welfare state may have found their motivation in much the same kind of sentiment.

CONCLUSIONS

The patterns of power, income, prestige, and rationality in behavior are not the only elements necessary in a dynamic theory of stratification. Consequently, detailed consideration of shifts in these patterns will not provide a complete explanation of trends in the rigidity of class systems. To neglect their consideration, however, is to run the risk of arriving at an erroneous perception of structural and functional changes in class phenomena.

How far attention to the foregoing variables will reduce the myth content of class theory is impossible to estimate. In practice, the reduction will necessarily be a joint operation; adequate theoretical analysis must be coordinated with methodologically sound empirical investigation. Weakness in each of these departments has contributed to the present contradictions in class analysis, and the improvement of each appears essential to any substantial progress in the field.

Two important values should arise from the theoretical changes indicated in the preceding discussion. Differences between class structures in industrial democracies and those in other socio-cultural systems should be made more comprehensible. In addition, a more sensitive approach to the prediction of stratification trends in Western class structures should be facilitated. In the latter regard, particularly, the needs of class theory are acute. The influences which have had the heaviest impact on status relations in recent decades seem to be elements that contemporary theory is little prepared to manage. The result is an ambiguity as to whether the weight of these influences is primarily on the side of a reduction of present-day class differences, or on the side of a crystallizing status system. This ambiguity is not likely to be resolved without some attention to the task of theoretical reconstruction.

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